

Learning to laugh

Several months ago, my friend Joe, the coordinator for a Virginia citizens' group, sent me a copy of a job description for a community organizer, whom they are hiring. One of the half dozen qualifications listed was "sense of humor."

Obviously not a Mennonite organization, I thought.

Why "obviously"? Because Mennonites just aren't funny. At least they're not funny historically (except perhaps Katherine Suderman in "Watching the flowers quiver"). My interview with Katie Funk Wiebe ("The handprint on the hat") helps to explain that history. She says that Mennonites and other Anabaptists, coming out of a heritage of protest and persecution, could not afford to be funny, to laugh at themselves. To do so meant to admit to just the slightest bit of doubt that maybe we weren't perfect and in possession of The Only Truth—not acceptable for a people who were risking everything.

But we're learning. We now have among us at least one stand-up comic (Christy Risser, who sent some thoughts on humor for this issue), as well as a woman astute enough to gather bulletin humor into one place (June Alliman Yoder, "The peach that passeth understanding"). In the past decade or so we've witnessed the birth of first *Mennonite Distorter*, a Canadian independent periodical that originated as a take-off on *Mennonite Reporter*, and then, more recently, its U.S. sort-of-counterpart, *Mennonot*. The current editors of *Mennonite Distorter* sent samples of their favorite "feminist humor" from the publication's pages for this issue of the *Report*, while *Mennonot* publisher Sheri Hostetler has produced some original satire.

Which provides a good segue into an obligatory disclaimer: Some of what you read in this issue is *satire*. Satire, defined by *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*, is [2] "trenchant wit, irony or sarcasm used to

expose and discredit vice or folly." I have heard the comment from more than one Mennonite editor that "we can't publish satire because there are always people who take it literally." Hence the disclaimer.

Some of the satire is subtle: for example, the little piece called "The perfect pastor." No doubt it was put together from averaging bona fide statistics, resulting in some characteristics so ridiculous one has to laugh. But notice the personal pronouns. An oversight on the part of the editor? I think not.

And some of what you read here is not satire at all. Carol Penner tells a side-splitting story about trying on her sister's wedding dress—but there's a twist at the end. Sometimes remembering laughter gets you through the tears. And Jo-Ann Brant observes that what we consider funny has something to say about gender differences and personal ethics.

Humor serves one other important function for groups that are oppressed yet powerful enough in a global context to be able to speak out. It gives us a voice in which to speak. Women in the Mennonite/Anabaptist church fit those criteria. Andrea Zuercher's contribution, "Women who run with the prairie dogs," looks at how we find our voices with humor in the workplace.

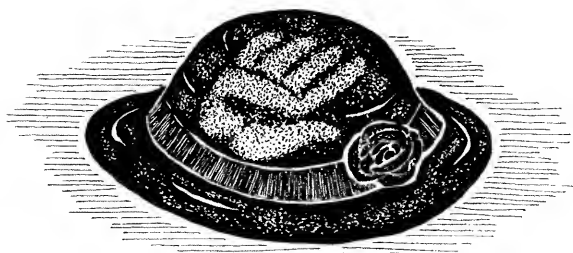
We live in an uncertain time here on the lip of the millennium. If we've finally convinced ourselves as women that we can be angry and sad as openly and unashamedly as feels right, then we need equally to acknowledge the right to laugh. Not to minimize or trivialize the pain or the struggle but to keep us strong enough to live through it, to stay at it—to "keep on walking forward."

That last phrase comes from a community organizing song. Which reminds me, I hope Joe found that laughing community organizer. Maybe someday it'll be a Mennonite.

—Melanie Zuercher, compiler

Melanie Zuercher lives in Newton, Kan. She is the last assistant editor of *The Mennonite* in its original incarnation (until Feb. 1). She also works for the General Conference Mennonite Church as the denomination's news editor. Melanie, who grew up in Kentucky, stays alert for opportunities to get to ground higher than a freeway overpass as often as possible.





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by Katie Funk Wiebe and Melanie Zuercher

The handprint on the hat— how humor keeps us honest

*If you think "Mennonite humor" seems like an oxymoron, an "expert" on that subject seems even more so. However, if anyone can claim the title, it would be Katie Funk Wiebe. Born in Canada of parents who emigrated from Russia, Katie is now retired from teaching English at Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kan. She is a lifelong Mennonite Brethren, widely known in broader Mennonite circles because of her prolific storytelling and writing—15 books, the most recent being a memoir called *The Storekeeper's Daughter* (Herald Press, 1996), along with countless articles. For a number of years, Katie wrote a column for *Festival Quarterly*—"Reclassified"—of jokes and funny stories that were "Mennonite" or had been adapted to be so. She wrote the entry on "Humor" in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5 (Herald Press, 1990). The following comes from an interview with Katie done at her home in Wichita.*

I grew up being very serious. Humor was frowned on in the church, and this was supported by Scripture such as Ephesians 5:4, "Entirely out of place is obscene, silly or vulgar talk." There was a prohibition against humor, jesting and obscenity. There was no laughing or clapping in church.

In the 1970s, I got a request from Phyllis Pellman Good, editor of *Festival Quarterly*, to do an article, and I chose to write it on "Why Mennonites can't laugh at themselves." It must have gotten a lot of attention, because I was asked to do a column. And here I was trying to develop a reputation as a "serious" writer.

But I found a great deal of joy in putting together stories that people sent me and that I collected from reading history. A lot came out of observations at conferences and from just keeping my ears open.

I began to collect books on humor. I found, for example, that the Jews were a people very similar to the Mennonites, but we Mennonites had never learned to laugh at ourselves the way Jews have.

One reason was our zeal for being right. We had the answers. Everything was "spiritual," so to make fun of any part of our lives was sacrilegious.

The essence of humor is to acknowledge that we're human. We think of ourselves as humble, but humorless people aren't really humble. Humor sees the incongruity between the actual and the ideal. A good humorist finds the cracks, pricks the bubble of pomposity.

Some of my thinking on this started at Bible college in Winnipeg, when my husband and I wrote a kind of satire of the typical Bible college student who came full of zeal, carrying the big briefcase and the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible*. I remember going to conferences—of course, not as a delegate!—sitting in the back lefthand row and poking fun at the political maneuvering. Later, my husband, a pastor, would have some of his pastor friends over and I'd kid them about all the politics, and they couldn't see it.

Anabaptists come from a tradition of protesters. Humor and protest can't sleep in the same bed. When you're taking a protest view on life, it's very serious and there is no room for anything else. There's no room for error; you've got to be very sure of yourself. There comes a time when we need someone to come along and prick the balloon.

I was part of the Mennonite women's movement from the late '60s into the mid-80s, and we were also protesters. It would have helped if we could have taken ourselves less seriously.

The absence of laughter is one of the saddest signs of overemphasis on the protest mentality. A protester assumes she or he has a claim on the truth, while humor allows for error. Humor lets the air out of the tire to keep the tube from exploding.

One purpose of humor is to break down attitudes. One way to free ourselves from tradition is to make fun of it.

After my husband died, here I was with four children, working and going to school. All this together had made me a very serious person. Then a friend said to me after hearing me speak, "Katie, smile more—be yourself." That freed me to return to being who I was. When I was 15 or 16, I had the world by the tail and was swinging it around. But I lost that when I became a "full-fledged member" of the Mennonite church. I finally decided I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by letting go. If I had fun, so would my audience.

"The essence of humor is to acknowledge that we're human. We think of ourselves as humble, but humorless people aren't really humble. A good humorist finds the cracks, pricks the bubble of pomposity."

Mennonite humor has been about our male leaders—there are lots of preacher stories. Mennonite humor has focused on what we see as our strengths, such as thrift and frugality, which sometimes looks more like miserliness and greed; our dedication to work; our institutions—boards and conferences; our distinctive doctrines such as the peace position; and our simple lifestyle.

Women are relatively new in Mennonite church leadership. If women had been in more public positions historically, there would be more jokes and stories about them. There are a couple I like, such as this one: A Mennonite woman felt somewhat strange at her first board meeting and hesitated to enter the room filled with men, for she heard her name mentioned. "I'm glad we've got Miriam Friesen on the board," one man said. "Why?" asked another. "Maybe now we'll have better coffee. Krehbiel just didn't know how to make coffee."

We didn't use much humor in the early days of the Mennonite women's movement. I remember an early conference in Washington where there was a lot of weeping as women began to recognize that they weren't alone in questioning women's traditional roles. I gave the keynote address at the Women Doing Theology conference in Waterloo (in 1991). I was being very personal. For example, I told a story about when my husband was ordained, and I was up on the platform with him. This was back when everyone wore hats. When it came time for the laying on of hands, the minister laid his hand on my head, too, and when it was over, there was the preacher's sweaty handprint on my new black velvet hat. "So," I said, "I received the sign without the office." As I went along there at Waterloo, I began to realize, They think I'm being funny! These were mostly younger women, who were more able to see the humor in these situations.

We need a humor issue like this one to make us more aware of the fact that humor can help us. It can make us more playful instead of harsh, rigid and fearful. Humor gives us a chance to look honestly at ourselves. The mistakes we're making, our weaknesses and strengths—that's where the humor is, poking at "strengths" that have little holes in them.

Humor looks for the chink in the armor of eternal righteousness sometimes covered by jeans, dresses, a cape or a plain coat. Jokes about ourselves keep us humble and assure our membership in the human race.

Watch your mailbox. . . .

A letter from Martha Stewart

Monday, 9:00 a.m.

Hi Loretta,

This perfectly delightful note is being sent on paper I made myself to tell you what I have been up to. Since it snowed last night, I got up early and made a sled with old barn wood and a glue gun. I hand-painted it in gold leaf, got out my loom, and made a blanket in peaches and mauves. Then to make the sled complete, I made a horse to pull it from DNA that I just had sitting around in my craft room.

By then, it was time to start making the place mats and napkins for my 20 breakfast guests. I'm serving the old standard Stewart twelve-course breakfast, but I'll let you in on a little secret: I didn't have time to make the table and chairs this morning, so I used the ones I had on hand.

Before I moved the table into the dining room, I decided to add just a touch of the holidays. So, I repainted the room in pinks and stenciled gold stars on the ceiling. Then, while the bread was rising, I took antique candle molds and made the dishes (exactly the same shade of pink) to use for breakfast. These were made from Hungarian clay, which you can get in almost any Hungarian craft store.

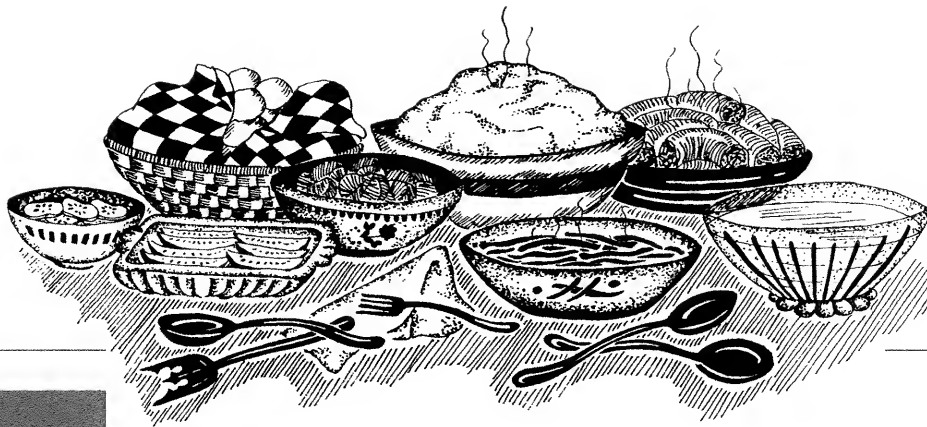
Well, I must run. I need to finish the buttonholes on the dress I'm wearing for breakfast. I'll get out the sled and drive this note to the post office as soon as the glue dries on the envelope I'll be making. Hope my breakfast guests don't stay too long—I have 40,000 cranberries to string with bay leaves before my speaking engagement at noon. It's a good thing.

Love,

Martha Stewart

P.S. When I made the ribbon for this typewriter, I used 1/8-inch gold gauze. I soaked the gauze in a mixture of white grapes and blackberries which I grew, picked and crushed last week just for fun.

This "letter" came to me in a dream . . . no, actually, via the Internet, with thanks to Christy Risser and Andrea Zuercher.



"Stories told in *plautdeutsch* always seemed much funnier than their English counterpart."

by Kevin Driedger

Watching the flowers quiver

"Katherine Suderman" is the name that first comes to mind when I think of Mennonite women and humor. She was my mother's mother. I had the great fortune of growing up in the same small southern Manitoba town where she lived. Every Sunday after church our family would drive over to her house for a dinner that was usually heavy on the meats, included vegetables from the garden and frequently ended with Jell-O for dessert. The meal was always filled with stories.

My grandmother was raised in the small all-Russian Mennonite village of Reinland, Manitoba, the second of eight children. *Plautdeutsch* was the language of her life—a life that centered around the farm and the church. Although she had lived a challenging life, she loved to laugh and loved to share her humor with others.

As we proceeded from dish to dish, conversation moved from subject to subject. Some were short, tasty and maybe a little tart, while others more substantial and required more time to savor their richness. Conversation about the week's events was always interspersed with stories from Grandma's past. She always told them with a twinkle in her eye and a sly grin on her mouth, and they ended with her body shaking in laughter.

Her stories were frequently of the tricks she had played when she was a young girl. As the second child and the oldest daughter in a family of 10, she had many younger siblings to bear the brunt of her humor. But her teasing was always done with a spirit of gentleness.

On one occasion, she targeted her youngest brother David, who was four years old at the time.

She asked, "David, are you a boy or a girl?"

Probably sensing that this was a trick question, he quickly replied, "I'm a boy."

Then she asked him to look at the eyes of his three brothers and four sisters. It so happened that the three brothers all had brown eyes and the four sisters, and David, all had blue eyes.

Waiting until David had carefully examined everyone's eyes as to color, she asked again, "Now David, tell me, are you a boy or a girl?"

Very sheepishly he replied, "I don't know."

At this point his father came to his rescue. He scolded Katherine for confusing the boy and called David to himself, "Come, David, you are my special boy."

Grandma and I were separated not only by a generation, but also by language. What had been her first language is for me now only a few words and phrases. So after a story was told there was usually a pause in which one of my parents would provide a translation for me and my siblings. Although I didn't understand the words, *plautdeutsch* struck me as a language made for humor. The language has a rhythm and sound that seems to bring stories alive and lends itself well to verses and sayings. My Grandma had many of these sayings in her repertoire. I remember her trying to teach me across the dinner table:

Mie hungat, Mie schlungat, Mie schlackat die Buck.

I'm hungry, I'm schlungry, I shake my belly.

Stories told in *plautdeutsch* always seemed much funnier than their English counterpart.

Grandma liked to tease not only as a young girl but even as an older woman. When I came home from school and visited her, she quizzed me with one of her favorite questions, did I have a girlfriend yet? To her dismay, the answer was once again that I did not. Then, with a gleam in her eye, she offered to come along with me and help me find one. She liked the image of this stooped over old woman searching for a girlfriend for her grandson.

Grandma would sometimes wear flower print dresses. One of my lasting memories of her is hearing her tell a story and then watching the flowers of her dress quiver as her body shook with laughter.

Kevin Driedger grew up not far from Reinland in Winkler, Manitoba. To his Grandma Suderman's delight, while attending seminary, Kevin found a girlfriend in June Mears. Grandma Suderman had said she wanted to live long enough to see Kevin get married, and she loved June very much. She died, at age 95, during the first year of June and Kevin's marriage.

Some thoughts on humor
from Christy Risser. . . .

"Laugh out loud whenever the Spirit moves you. We live in an age that encourages us to laugh *at* one another. The Spirit will never move you to laugh *at* anyone but yourself."

"Where there is laughter, the kind that represents the joy of God, angels are nearby and are laughing with you. If you listen closely, you can hear their wings rustle as their shoulders shake with giggling."

collected by June Alliman Yoder

"The peach that passeth understanding"

Bulletin errors and pulpit bloopers

This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Johnson to come forward and lay an egg on the altar.

Women usually wear dresses to Sunday meetings. Most men wear tires, but it is not required.

May you reap a harvest of bountiful blessings and the peach that passeth understanding.

For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.

Sermon: "Hell: Its Location an Absolute Certainty"
Solo: "Tell Mother I'll Be There"

Rev. Parker will have a massage for us all at the 8:30 service next Sunday.

Congratulations to Tom and Rhonda on the birth of their daughter October 13-17.

We are grateful to the trustees for contracting for the new church parking lot. It is now ready for our use. Remember: everyone should park on an angel.

The Women's Missionary Society will guilt on Wednesday.

Hymn #527: "Jesus Shall Resign"

Hymn: "I am Thin, O Lord"

Hymn: "Tis So Sweet to Rust in Jesus"



Hymn: "Who Shall Dwell on Thy Holy Hell?"

Hymn: "Jesus Loves Even Men"

In the Christmas program: "The children will sing 'Who is He in Yoder Stall?'"

Anyone wishing to hose the missionaries call 326-5591.

Salt and Light Class—topics for next Sunday: mercy killing, living wills and youth in asia.

Body and Soul will no longer meet during the summer.

From the minutes of the women's board meeting: "Gladys Short passed away several weeks ago. Emma Julian asked for the address to send used pantyhose."

Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. A good time to get rid of things not worth keeping and too good to throw away. Bring your husbands.

June Alliman Yoder invites readers to send her additional bulletin errors to add to her collection. She thanks you in advance: J. Alliman Yoder, AMBS, 3003 Benham Ave., Elkhart, IN 46517, or e-mail jayoder@ambs.edu. She requests that the material here not be used without permission.

"Persons 'on top' (frequently men) can use humor to intimidate and control (for example, when in-jokes are used to delineate 'us' and 'them')."

by Andrea Zuercher

Women who run with the prairie dogs

One need only look at the runaway popularity of Scott Adams's comic strip, "Dilbert," to see that humor in the workplace is "in." A person working outside the home in a traditional nine-to-five job spends more than one-third of her time—easily half of her waking hours—at work, getting to work, coming home from work, obsessing about work and preparing to work. Many of us find that our hours of employment stretch still further. It's no wonder that working makes such good material.

The role of humor at work, in my experience, varies according to power structures and hierarchies. Persons "on top" (frequently men) can use humor to intimidate and control (for example, when in-jokes are used to delineate "us" and "them"). This use of humor can border on harassment, if a worker is forced to listen to jokes on subject matter she feels is inappropriate but, because of her standing in an organization, fears that commenting or complaining could only make things worse—even cost her the job.

Persons "on the bottom" (frequently women) use humor to cope. At my job, I have had ample opportunity to observe this dynamic. More about this in a moment. It has often been observed—not just about workplace humor—that one had better laugh, lest one find oneself crying. In this way, humor at the workplace can serve as an acceptable emotional outlet or even a safety valve.

Sometimes attempts at humor under these circumstances can backfire, but in general a little bit of levity, judiciously applied, offers a welcome escape from an unpleasant reality.

This summer I found myself, by happy circumstance, in an ideal setting in which to ponder the role of humor in the workplace. I say "happy" not because the situation was, but



because it gave me a context in which to consider the role humor can play in our work lives—in an all-too-real laboratory.

In January 1997, I left a job that I had held for more than 10 years. Making a job change after all that time was enough of a challenge on its own; on top of that, I moved halfway across the country. The new job, in communications, offered me a chance to use some skills that had gone unused during my years as an editor and production specialist. Lots of things about the decision made it less than an agonizing choice, but it represented an upheaval nonetheless.

I was hired as communications director by the new institute's president, a large, affable man (self-described as a "recovering physician") with a laid-back attitude and obvious passion for his work. I left my friends, my work, my choirs, one of my cats, and 10 years' worth of familiar territory back East to strike out for the unknown. In some ways Kansas did not represent much of an unknown—many mistakenly assumed that I was moving back "home," even though I had never lived in Kansas, just spent years' worth

“‘Prairie-dogged’ refers to the phenomenon of heads popping up above cubicle partitions when something interesting happens out in the common spaces.”

of holidays visiting relatives there. In other ways, I felt like one of the pioneers as I set out across a frozen America in a red pickup truck laden with my belongings and one scared cat huddled in his carrier.

Barely six months later, I watched as the small research institute for which I'd moved halfway across the country struggled through upheavals that included the forced resignation of the president, who had hired me. For this, I thought ruefully, I gave up ten years' experience, contacts, friends, activities—a life. The future suddenly seemed uncertain.

At such times the humor that prevails in an office could be called “gallows humor.” One day a staff member stopped by my cubicle (from which I had just “prairie-dogged”—a term that refers to the phenomenon of heads popping up above cubicle partitions when something interesting happens out in the common spaces). This researcher specialized in examining how social forces have an impact on health. He wryly commented that we had the perfect makings of a natural experiment on how one's sense of purpose at work affects one's health. If we'd only had the foresight, he lamented, to do a pre-test to gather some baseline data on how happy we had all been before disaster struck, we'd have the perfect study to present at next fall's professional meetings.

I found a way to turn the adversity into a new challenge. I am joining the ranks of those who work from home and “telecommute” by computer, fax, and phone. Cathy Guisewite's comic heroine “Cathy” has replaced Dilbert as my role model, for Cathy, too, just became the prototype worker of the '90s. I'll read those comic strips with much greater interest now. I'll have to find sources other than co-workers for my comic relief when the daily stress of walking from the kitchen to my “office” (formerly known as the dining room) becomes too intense and there is nobody with whom I can “prairie-dog” any more. Who knows? Maybe I'll see a real prairie dog out my window.

Andrea Zuercher lives in Lawrence, Kan., where she telecommutes as deputy editor for *Health Affairs*, a health policy journal published in Bethesda, Md. She prefers life in a midwestern university town to the pace of urban living, even if it means spending more time in airplanes.

Top ten reasons why women don't speak up more at conference

- *Number of times a man spoke from the floor during delegate discussions: 126*
 - *Number of times a woman spoke from the floor during delegate discussions: 23*
—from the “Winnipeg '97 index,” The Mennonite Aug. 12, 1997
10. Someone in Bosnia will be colder next January if they don't finish those afghans.
 9. They're winded from trying to carry the minority soprano and alto lines.
 8. It's much more fun watching the men try to play politics.
 7. The baby just fell asleep.
 6. They're still waiting for things to be run according to Roberta's Rules of Order.
 5. They've never presumed to speak *for* God, and would rather speak *to* her in private.
 4. They began planning the next Women Doing Theology conference while putting away the snacks and forgot to come back into the auditorium.
 3. They don't know where that microphone has *been*.
 2. They settled everything while waiting in line for the washroom.
 1. They know where the work of the church actually gets done.

Melanie Zuercher will take all the blame for compiling this list, although she had help from the staff of a certain denominational communications department, who refuse to assume any responsibility and prefer to remain anonymous.



by Carol Penner

The Bride Lady

I don't know why I was suddenly seized with the urge to try on my sister's wedding dress.

Maybe it was because I was doing some wishful thinking, wondering whether in the next year or two I'd be walking down some aisle somewhere. Joanne's dress had been beautiful on her. What would I look like all dressed in white?

Maybe it was because no one was home, and I knew I'd never get the nerve to ask her if I could try it on. "Hey, hey, hey, got someone in mind, Carol?" "When's the big day—I hope you're going to spring for a big party. . . ." I was only staying with her and Andrew for the summer; who knows when I'd get the opportunity again?

Maybe it was just because I was bored. A Tuesday afternoon, the sun sloping in like streamers—bride for a minute. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

I remember sort of giggling as I opened her closet, pushing away all the suits and dresses to get to the very back. There it was, zipped into a see-through bag. I took it to the bathroom.

It only took a few seconds of wiggling and pulling and I was in. Instant bride. I was radiant. I had to see all of myself, so I made the processional walk into the hallway. Stunning. It was a bit tight, but the shirring and lace covered that up. You don't really need to breathe deeply if you're getting married anyway, do you?

Seeing myself in the dress made it real. I could do this. I could really get married. Maybe it will work out, maybe this will be me in a year or two.

I am normally a cautious person, and even though I knew that they wouldn't be home for at least 45 minutes, I felt uneasy being in the dress. I could just see them opening the door. "Oh, hi, Joanne, I was just trying on your wedding dress." Not a pretty scenario. I don't know what it is about wedding dresses, but they're like underwear or toothbrushes: People don't like to share them.

Taking one last look in the hall mirror, I retreated to the bathroom to disrobe. I reached around and managed to unzip, but when I tried to pull the dress over my head, it didn't move. It didn't move at all. I mean, it was not moving off my body. At all. This was a bit disturbing, as it had come on over my head. Well, in one way out the other is a good saying, so I let go of the hoisted-up skirt. Pulling myself into the smallest possible contortionist pose, I managed to get the sleeves peeled off but when I tried to wiggle it down over my hips, it was no go.

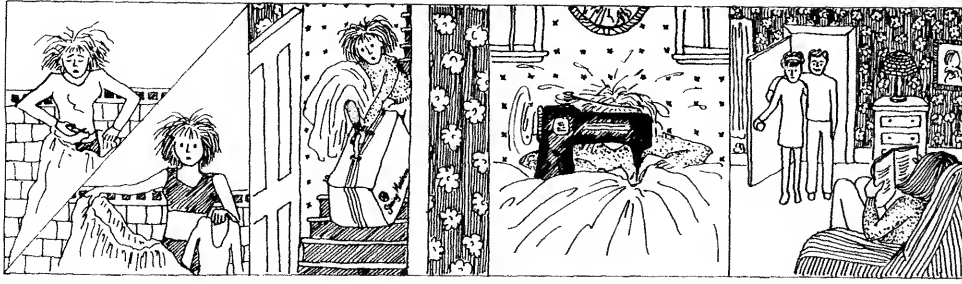
I laughed, uneasily, saying out loud, "This is ridiculous." I renewed my effort to slither it off of my hips, but I heard the sound of threads straining and stopped. "It must go up—that's the way it came on. I must not have tried the right way." I slipped the top back up. I hoisted, I pulled, I wiggled, I writhed, I inched, yanked and shimmied, but the dress did not budge.

Now, I am not a person who is normally bothered by claustrophobia, but at this moment I had a pretty good idea about that condition. I didn't like it at all. I am going to get this dress off, I muttered, and I gave it the old heave-ho. A distinct little rip sounded from the mid-section of the dress. I immediately stopped mid-ho.

I let the skirt fall back down to the ground and I came face-to-face with myself in the mirror. I suddenly knew with a deep certainty that I would never be able to get the dress off. Ever. I would have to wear this dress for the rest of my natural life. People would call me The Bride Lady. I would have to eat, sleep and walk in this dress forever. In the supermarket, people would turn and stare. I would have to explain I was not doing last-minute shopping for the reception. When I was driving the car, people would continually honk and wave. As an old woman, I'd be followed by children chanting, "Here comes The Bride Lady." I wanted out.

I looked at my watch. Thirty minutes till estimated time of arrival (ETA). I had to think fast, think fast, think fast. "Seam ripper" was what popped into my head. I bolted into my sister's room, flung open her sewing basket, grabbed the ripper and fled back to the bathroom. I took a deep breath. No need to panic. A few stitches should do the trick.

With a deft flick, I unstitched the side seam along a four-inch stretch. I tried to get the dress off. No noticeable difference. Six inches. No help. Eight inches of wide open, gaping, thread-trailing space and the dress still would not go over my



head. I tried the other side. Two-four-six-eight inches. This wasn't working. This must be the wrong place to open it up. How could it be wrong? What could be wrong?

If only the zipper were longer! I'd undone six inches under the zipper before I realized that the bottom of the zipper was fastened together and couldn't be opened to use the new space. Drat.

The temperature of the bathroom seemed to have skyrocketed 20 degrees. The dress was beginning to look a bit wrinkled and damp. It clung to my body even tighter. Looking at my watch, I lost all sense of reason. I attacked the waist seam. In two minutes, the dress was a heap on the floor. I, on the other hand, was filled with a whole new type of energy. Something mid-way between terror and mortification.

I ran to the front of the apartment and checked. No car in sight. Yet. ETA: 15 minutes. Repair the dress. I must repair the dress. I must sew the dress. I must sew the whole dress together. The sewing machine was in my sister's room. The only possible thing worse than having my sister come in on me wearing her wedding dress would be to have her come in on me sewing on her wedding dress. "Oh, hi, Joanne, thought I'd just do a few alterations on your wedding dress, hope you don't mind."

There was no alternative. I had to take the sewing machine up to my room. That way, if she came in during the repair process, I could hide the evidence. I didn't think through the logistics of what I was doing until I was halfway up the narrow, steep staircase, with my sister's wedding dress hanging limply over my shoulder, my arms throttling a large, cabinet-sized sewing machine that was too heavy for me to lift under normal circumstances. With my arms shaking and sweat dripping into my eyes, I heaved it, step by step, in a weird Quasimodo rhythm. At one point, I thought I was going to lose it, and only the thought of the puzzlement on my sister's face as she found my body, and the dress, pinned under the sewing machine at the bottom of the stairs spurred me on to newfound strength.

I reached the top, I threaded, I bobbed, I pinned. Plugging in the iron, I sewed here and there and there and all down there. I maniacally ironed on a towel grabbed from the rack. The dress looked sort of the same. ETA: one minute. Should I push my luck? Should I risk smuggling it back into her room? I checked out the street and it was all clear, so I whisked it back in, making sure the suits and other dresses were casually arranged. Then I darted out and up to my room. What about the sewing machine? Get it out. Thunk,

thunk, thunk, down it went. I ran up to my room, hiding all traces of sewing gear, and then ran into the bathroom, picking up the telltale bride threads that might somehow give me away.

When my sister came into the apartment, I appeared to be calmly reading a book in the living room. I never told her what happened.

It's been eight years since that afternoon, and you'd think somewhere in there I would have found the space to say, "Hey, you know what I did once?" But it always seemed a bit too off-kilter, a bit too private, like I'd overstepped my bounds and she wouldn't find it funny.

And then last September, her marriage broke up. The image I had from that summer of their marriage and their home, the plants in pots, the posters, the jokes' and the smell of curry—it all dissolved for me when she phoned. "How are you?" she asked brightly.

"Fine," I said. "What's new with you?"

Then it was sobs and "He's leaving me. . . ."

It didn't seem like the right time then to tell the story, nor a month later when she took her wedding dress and burned holes in it and smeared it with red paint and went to her staff Halloween party as the Bride of Frankenstein (she won first prize). My not telling her until then would have been too much of a reminder of what the dress had meant once. So I've kept the story to myself.

I did get married. In my own dress. I keep it safely hidden away in a box in the attic. Only I know where it is. It's only once in a while, like today, that I let myself remember how close I came to being The Bride Lady.

Carol Penner lives in Vineland, Ont., with her husband Eugene and two kids, Katie and Alex, who are 7 and 5. She works half-time for MCC Ontario and is trying to finish a doctoral dissertation in theology. She has lots of ideas of what she would like to do in her spare time, that is, if she ever gets some spare time!

"All men have to do to be funny is dress as women. There is something about the idea of a man trying to be like a woman that seems hilarious."

by Jo-Ann A. Brant

Men in black skirts

Analysis is probably the death of comedy, but we may learn a great deal about ourselves by examining why it is that we find certain ideas or situations funny.

I frequently use clips from comic movies in my courses, especially when we discuss metaphysics and ethics. Comedy often plays on the inherent contradictions that lie at the basis of our actions or ideas about the world. For example, in order to look at our notions of the relationship of the mind and body, I begin with a clip from the first *Star Wars* movie, where C3PO says to R2D2, "Don't call me a mindless philosopher!" (C3PO and R2D2 are two main characters who happen to be robots or "droids.") The class also discusses the relationship between the mind and body with reference to the movie *All of Me* in which Lily Tomlin's

mind transmigrates into Steve Martin's body. She controls the right side (subtle humor), while he controls the left.

One of my more infamous classes is on cross-dressing, including a discussion on current notions of human nature. Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire* or Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* demonstrate that all men have to do to be funny is dress as women. There is something about the idea of a man trying to be like a woman that seems hilarious.

The humor in *Tootsie* is compounded by the convictions of Hoffman's character, Michael Doherty, who believes that when he portrays a character he takes on the nature of that character; he thinks like that character. (In one very funny scene, he describes how he becomes a beefsteak tomato.) By the end of his charade as Dorothy Michaels, he has become a sensitive and caring person; he has become more "like a woman" in nature. Robin Williams's character undergoes a similar transformation. He ceases to be just his children's friend—the best dad on the block—and becomes a person concerned about their development, that is, a nurturing parent. Clearly, both films play on current ideas about the value of sensitivity and the role of fathers in raising children, as well as on more traditional sensibilities about what is appropriate to a man's nature.

Readers will probably shudder at some of the assumptions that undergird these movies. First of all, they assume that each gender has a very definite nature and, secondly, that if one violates this nature one becomes a comic character.

The class also looks at films in which women dress as men. While these are also humorous, the reasons tend to be different. The women themselves do not appear funny; the secondary characters take on that role. In *Impromptu*, Judy Davis as George Sand, a 19th century



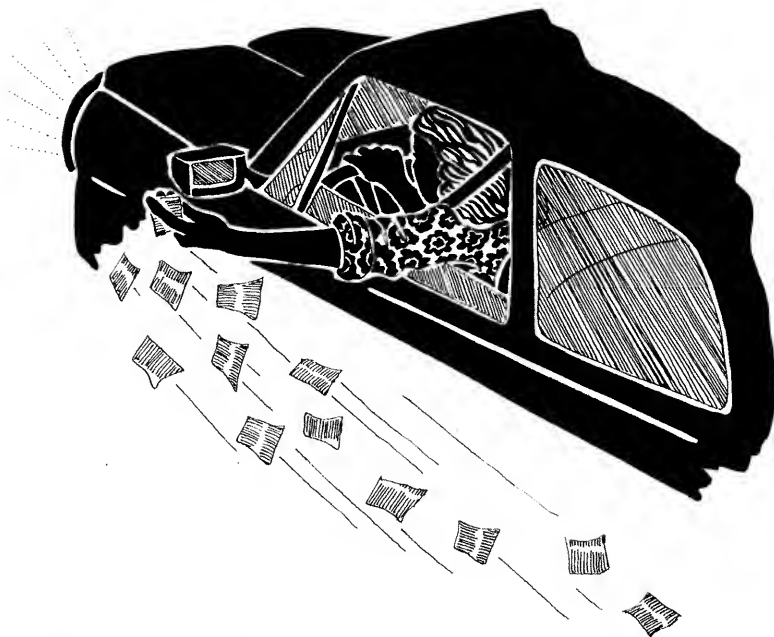
woman who dressed like a man, is able to make businessmen and respected artists seem ridiculous as they give her the sort of attention and authority due a man.

My students often object to the distinction that I make between why men and women are funny in cross-dress by bringing up examples from Shakespeare or the play *Victor/Victoria*. Shakespeare's women-dressed-as-men were at one time men pretending to be women dressed as men. The scene in *As You Like It* in which Phebe the shepherdess falls in love with Rosalind who is disguised as a boy originally played on the humor of one young man "in drag" making love to another young man in the same state. Today, the humor still revolves around the "absurdity" of a woman trying to seduce a woman whom she takes for a man. The humor in *Victor/Victoria* rests in the fact that Victoria is a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman and the embarrassment that her lover endures because everyone assumes he is homosexual. Once again, the humorous characters are those who mistake Victoria for a man. The women themselves in these movies or plays seldom appear ridiculous. They appropriate men's garb to gain access to power or security that society does not afford them as women.

One of the conclusions that my students often draw from looking at a number of examples of cross-dressing, including their own habits of attire, is that our notions about a woman's nature are becoming sufficiently fuzzy enough to make it difficult for a woman to violate them. Hence, a woman can wear pants or dresses. Men, on the other hand, are still bound by more rigorous ideas about what is normative for their gender and will, therefore, not wear dresses.

I must qualify the above assertion that men do not wear dresses. The day after the first time that I used cross-dressing to talk about changing notions of human nature, one of my students chose to wear a skirt to class. He had actually worn this before coming to Goshen College, but after our discussion, he felt that it was time to wear clothes traditionally worn by women on a regular basis. The next year, a more conservative student made reference to this student's apparel in the *Record*, the Goshen College student newspaper. The day after this appeared, everywhere one looked, one saw men in skirts. What conclusions may we draw? Either "the times they are a-changing," or one never knows what sort of impact one's teaching can have on the lives of students.

Jo-Ann A. Brant is on the faculty of the Department of Bible, Religion and Philosophy at Goshen (Ind.) College.



by Kelly Dueck, Aiden Schlichting Enns and Kathleen Epp

Lorena Barret severs her husband's authority

Lorena Barret, alleging her husband had abused passages of the Bible in order to make her more submissive, took direct action and severed his scriptures.

Late in the evening of January 23, John Barret led evening devotions, insisting that she be quiet in church. After John had gone to sleep, Lorena got a twelve-inch kitchen knife, went over to his side of the bed and cut his New International Version in several pieces.

Believing that he would tape the torn pieces back together, she drove off in the car and threw the removed pages out of the window. (All the so-called "abusive passages" were underlined in red ink. In women's circles, such a Bible is known as a "red don't-let-her edition.")

A Mennonite women's group has started a vigil for Lorena, and a Mennonite men's group has formed a support group for John.

from Mennonite Distorter, April 1994

Here are some real statistics that apply to US women, submitted by Christy Risser

Men do 29% of laundry each week. Only 7% of women trust their husbands to do it correctly.

46.5% of men say they always put the seat down after they've used the toilet, yet women claim to always find it up.

66% of women and 59% of men have used a mix to cook and taken credit for doing it from scratch.

The average bra size today is 36C, whereas 10 years ago it was 34B.

85% of women wear the wrong bra size.

Christy Risser, Goshen, Ind., is the official purveyor of the "thought for the day" at the Mennonite Board of Missions office in Elkhart. One of the recent "thoughts" she shared

was: "A wise person never plays leapfrog with a unicorn." Christy is a writer and photographer for MBM. On weekends, she and her cat, Hey-Hannah-ASB-Bettie-Gloria-Moses-Rodrigues, make bread and go for bike rides.

by Kelly Dueck, Aiden Schlichting Enns and Kathleen Epp

For the lady of the house of the Lord

While many church conferences have been struggling with the place of women in church leadership, the EEMC (Evangelical Extremely Masculine Conference) has taken bold steps to make room for some "lady pastors." Says moderator Harvey Wahl-Bender, "We have recognized that women have been called to serve in many different ways. Some may even serve in a quasi-leadership role."

The conference has issued guidelines for lady-pastoring in a booklet and video entitled "For the Lady of the House of the Lord." The program was kicked off by a weekend retreat where selected ladies from conference churches began their training. Each lady received a complimentary pink and lavender Lady Pastor tote bag and Bible cover.

The program invites ladies to preach—not sermons, but sermonettes. These are appropriate for Ladies' Aid groups, evening services and specially designated Sunday morning

services. A model for lady worship leaders was also presented, with specific concern for the pastoral prayer. If allowed to pray, ladies were encouraged to keep their emotions under control and to write down what they would say.

As part of the well-rounded program, ladies were encouraged to examine their wardrobes. A lady pastor must not present herself in bold distracting colors nor should she sport a masculine style. Lady Pastor fashion consultant Calvin Klippenstein aptly demonstrated that ladies can achieve an appropriately feminine, pastoral look with pastels, delicate prints and modest hemlines.

While reactions to the new initiative have been mixed, many have seen positive results and now support the program. Pastor Peters of the Saskatchewan EEMC commented, "Basically what we're doing is reaffirming the work that women have always done. We've given them a pat on the back and a new title. Hey, let's face it, we're making the little ladies feel like they have a place in the work of the kingdom."

from Mennonite Distorter, Fall 1994

Kelly Dueck (who's married to a Kelly, which he says makes for some interesting phone exchanges), Kathleen Epp and Aiden Schlichting Enns all live in Winnipeg, a Canadian city with 50 Mennonite churches and thousands and thousands of Mennonites. They put together the *Mennonite Distorter* about four times a year. Order it from Box 27041, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 3Z0 (\$10 in Canada, \$12 elsewhere). Sample it on the web, <http://www.mbnet.mb.ca/~dueck>, or E-mail for a free sample, dueck@mbnet.mb.ca. Please do not use these articles without permission from *Mennonite Distorter*.



by Sheri Hostetler

Holy Spirit visits sewing circle, women say

Honey Creek, Ohio (MP)—A group of women from a Mennonite church here believe they have been visited by the Holy Spirit. The women, all members of the Maple Creek Mennonite Church, were gathered for their monthly sewing circle last July. They were having their usual morning devotions when “the presence of the Spirit fell upon the group,” said Erma Detweiler, one of the women in attendance.

When asked if the descent of the Spirit sounded like the rushing of a mighty wind, Detweiler replied, “Not really. It was more like that swishing noise your legs make when you’re walking in pantyhose.” This was the women’s first clue that a different sort of Spirit had been visited upon them.

The second clue came when, immediately after the descent of the Spirit, each of the women not only found her own voice but began speaking in it. It was then that the Spirit revealed itself to the group as a feminine manifestation of the divine, according to Detweiler.

Initially, the women assumed they should refer to the Spirit as “Sophia,” the feminine personification of Wisdom found in Old Testament scriptures. “The irony is that some of us had been as angry as anybody about the Re-imagining Conference,” Detweiler said. “A couple of us even wrote letters to the *Gospel Herald*.”

Sophia, however, disclosed her preference to be called Martha. This led to some confusion among the women.

“We said to Her, ‘Don’t you mean Mary?’ She said that’s what Catholics call her, but that she thought we could identify more with Martha,” said Lovina Mast, also in attendance at the unusual morning devotions.

The women continued to have daily visitations by Martha for almost a week. They report that in appearance, Martha did not at all resemble a first century Palestinian woman.

“In fact, she looked a lot like (well-known Mennonite writer) Elaine Rich,” said Mast.



The women said that during most of her appearances, Martha spoke mysteries too profound for words. One time, however she did reveal a foolproof recipe for shoofly pie.

In the aftermath of this “Second Pentecost,” the women are struggling to discern their next step. Some have reportedly set up camp in the room where the visitation occurred, hoping that Martha will reappear and reveal more recipes so that they can publish a new *Mennonite Community Cookbook*.

Others have become “more aware of their bodies” and have enrolled in a class through the local college’s Women’s Studies Department entitled, “Reclaiming our Body-Selves through Creative Canning Techniques.”

“We believe that through creative canning, women can begin to re-weave the fabric of life that has been rent through millennia of patriarchal oppression,” said Fern Miller. “We

"Pastor Ward Miller, husband of Fern, said he doesn't know what his wife is talking about but admits he feels "oddly nurtured" by her canned corn."

are literally birthing a new way of being in the world by reclaiming the girl-child within through canning techniques that tap into the deep well of women's ways of knowing."

Pastor Ward Miller, husband of Fern, said he doesn't know what his wife is talking about but admits he feels "oddly nurtured" by her canned corn.

"It's her running around in lavender Danskin leotards I just can't understand," he said.

The most controversial group has split off from the church to form their own feminist separatist community on some farmland in northwest Ohio. The group has taken on the name of Women's Marthian Separatist Colony, or WMSC.

"The WMSC was looking for a new identity for the '90s, and this is it," said Lillith (formerly known as Lily Bontrager).

Asked if the group still considered themselves to be Mennonites, Lillith said, "We have joined our sisters in the Church of the Brethren in resisting patriarchal naming. How can we ever be liberated if we call ourselves by a name in which 'men' come first?"

The separatist faction briefly considered calling themselves "Womennonites" before rejecting that since it, too, contained the offending word. The name "Womynnonites" is currently undergoing a process of consensus, according to Lillith.

When asked for comment about this "Second Pentecost," prominent church officials wept openly, saying that between homosexuality and the merger, they were just too overwhelmed to deal with the second coming of the Holy Spirit.

Sheri Hostetler is a writer, poet, and publisher of *Mennonot* (shameless plug to follow) living in Oakland, California. She graduated with an M.A. in feminist liberation theology from the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass., where she learned to birth, weave and spin. She is a member of First Mennonite Church of San Francisco. To subscribe to *Mennonot*, send \$2.50 U.S. for each issue to: Steve Mullet, 5330 CR 626, Millersburg, OH 44654. Write sherihoss@aol.com (for editorial stuff) or smullet@keybridgeltld.com (for subscriptions). <http://members.aol.com/smullet/mennonot/home.htm>.

Want ads (or, why God made proofreaders)

From the Internet

2 female Boston Terrier puppies, 7 wks. old, perfect markings, 555-1234. Leave mess.

Lost: small apricot poodle. Reward. Neutered. Like one of the family.

For sale: an antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers.

Four-poster bed, 101 years old. Perfect for antique lover.

Now is your chance to have your ears pierced and get an extra pair to take home, too.

Mt. Kilimanjaro, the breathtaking backdrop for the Serena Lodge. Swim in the lovely pool while you drink it all in.

Stock up and save. Limit: one.

For Rent: 6-room hated apartment.

Man wanted to work in dynamite factory. Must be willing to travel.

Used Cars: Why go elsewhere to be cheated? Come here first!

Christmas tag-sale. Handmade gifts for the hard-to-find person.

Wanted. Man to take care of cow that does not smoke or drink.

3-year-old teacher need for pre-school. Experience preferred.

Auto Repair Service. Free pick-up and delivery. Try us once, you'll never go anywhere again.

And now, the Superstore—unequaled in size, unmatched in variety, unrivaled inconvenience.

We will oil your sewing machine and adjust tension in your home for \$1.00.

Women in ministry

Eleanor Beachy is interim pastor at First Church, Moundridge, Kan.

Dorothea Janzen is interim pastor at Alexanderwohl Church, Goessel, Kan.

Debbie Schmidt was ordained as pastor at First Church, Hutchinson, Kan.

Conrad and Donna Mast were licensed as co-pastors of Kingview Mennonite Church, Scottsdale, Pa.

Carol Rose is pastor of Church of the Servant in Wichita, Kan.

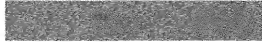
Mary Mae Schwartzentruber has been appointed interim executive secretary of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada for 18 months

beginning January 1, 1998. She was pastor at Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church from 1980–1990 and then at Nairn Mennonite Church from 1991–1997. **Mary Burkholder**, current executive secretary, is retiring after six years in the position.

News and verbs

- Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy International announces the **third bi-annual Come to the Water Conference**, “Then and Now: The Journey of Holiness,” to be held April 23–26, 1998 at the Four Points Hotel Riverwalk North in San Antonio, Texas. More than 400 women actively engaged in or preparing for church-related ministries are expected to attend from seven sponsoring denominations. Susie Stanley, conference convener and Professor of Historical Theology at Messiah College, explains the purpose of the conference, “Wesleyan/Holiness denominations have been ordaining women for over 100 years. This conference brings together women from churches with a long-held legacy of ordaining women in order to celebrate where we have come from and to equip us for where God will lead us in the new millennium.” Conference materials may be obtained by calling 503-554-3885 or from <http://www.messiah.edu/hpages/facstaff/ssstanley/home.htm>
- *Vox Feminarum*, a journal of feminist spirituality, presents “**Textures and Tensions: The Fabric of Women’s Relationships**.” Vox Feminarum invites a feminist critique of social and ecclesiastical structures, and encourages women to explore the relationships between their faith traditions, feminism, spirituality and personal experience. For more information contact Ginny Freeman MacOwan or Susan L. Scott, editors, at 519-576-4588 or E-mail: voxfeminarum@sympatico.ca.
- *Faith for the Journey: Youth Explore the Confession of Faith*, by Ann Weber Becker, is a resource designed to help youth, pastors and other leaders explore their growing faith. Each chapter is based on one of the articles of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Designed for use in catechism, Sunday school, youth retreats, family or individual study. Leader’s guide is included, 106 pages, \$8.95 U.S./ \$12/25 CAN. Available from Faith and Life Press at 1-800-743-2484.
- The fourth Women Doing Theology conference will be held June 25–27, 1998, on the campus of Bethel College, North Newton, Kan. The conference is sponsored by the Women’s Concerns office of Mennonite Central Committee U.S. and Kansas Mennonite Women in Ministry. Theme is “Journey Toward Healing.” For more information, contact Gwen Groff, MCC U.S. Women’s Concerns Coordinator, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500, 717-859-3889, or E-mail: gmg@mccus.org.
- Goshen College seeks a **full-time tenure-track faculty member to direct the speech program** and to teach additional courses as appropriate. Level of appointment and salary will depend on experience and degree(s) held. Responsibilities begin August 15, 1998. A master’s degree in communication or speech (or closely related area) is required, and candidates with the doctorate or ABD are highly desirable. Teaching experience is required, and additional experience as a professional communicator is preferred. To apply, please send a resumé and three professional references to: Paul Keim, Academic Dean, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526-4795, or E-mail: dean@goshen.edu. Women and members of under-represented groups are especially encouraged to apply.
- The Mathematics and computer science departments at Goshen College invite applicants for **teaching positions in mathematics, applied mathematics and computer science** beginning in August 1998. One position is tenure-track; the other position is initially a two-year appointment with a longer-term or tenure-track appointment possible depending on program growth. A master’s degree and graduate study in mathematics, applied mathematics and/or computer science are required; a Ph.D. in those or related areas is strongly preferred. Applicants are expected to be qualified to teach lower- and upper-level courses in at least two of the three areas mentioned. Specific assignments will depend on individual qualification and department resources. Women and members of under-represented groups are encouraged to apply. Send application to Paul Keim (see above).

Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.


from the Internet, via *Mennonite Reporter*

The perfect pastor chain letter

Results of a computerized survey indicate that the perfect pastor preaches exactly 15 minutes. He condemns sin but never embarrasses anyone. He works from 8 a.m. until midnight and also serves as janitor. He makes \$60 per week, wears good clothes, drives a new car and gives \$50 per week to the poor. He is 28 years of age, has preached for 25 years, is wonderfully gentle and handsome, loves to work with the teenagers and spends countless hours with seniors. He makes 15 visits daily to parish families, shut-ins and hospital patients and is always in the office when needed. If your pastor does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other parishes that are tired of their pastors, too. Then bundle up your pastor and send him to the church at the top of the list. In one week, you will receive 1,643 pastors. Surely one of them will be perfect.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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